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ABSTRACT

A project was undertaken in 1970-76 whose principal purpose was to study the prospects of two-way communication between an administrative authority (the office of the chancellor of the Swedish universities) and the general public (prospective students in the national plan for wider admissions). It grew out of criticism of a proposed national information system. The background, development,nd problems of the experiment are examined. (MSE)

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TITLE OF PROJECT: Studies of internal and external communication concerning higher education (the EKO project)

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BACKGROUND

The principal purpose of this project, which lasted from 1970 until 1976, was to study the prospects and conditions of two-way communication between an administrative authority (the Office of the Chancellor of the Swedish Universities, UKÄ) and the general public (i.e. prospective students according to a Swedish experiment of wider admissions). The ideological background to the project was provided by Swedish debate and research concerning the need for a dialogue between public authorities and citizens. The project therefore grew out of the criticism aimed from various quarters at the information system proposed by a Swedish Commission on Civic Information, (see Abrahamsson 1972). Originally the project was based on a relatively conventional model of experimentation comprising three phases, namely the description of information and contact activities at universities and colleges, analyses of information requirements and field experiments in two-way communication between educational organizations and presumptive adult learners.

In the event the project did not follow this pattern completely. The first year did begin with various at-

tempts to describe the information and contact activities of higher education, together with minor analyses of needs, but the major field experiment in two-way communication never materialized. Instead a number of minor contact experiments were carried out in the course of the project, namely 1) an experiment involving discussion groups on education and information needs at work (altogether some 100 persons distributed between four personnel groups: administrators, supervisory personnel, "home samaritans" and construction workers), 2) an experimental scheme of study circles on educational and vocational counseling for adult students (about 100 persons altogether), 3) an experiment in the distribution of education brochures via advertisements, and 4) a follow-up of two vocational courses.

Guided by the experience and results accruing from the various field experiments, the third phase of the project placed considerable emphasis on conceptual analysis, the aim being to develop a model for the analysis of information and counseling needs during adulthood as an aspect of the role change implied by the transition to studies.

General problems of information and contact activities

During the first year of the project, information and contact activities were described at various levels of university organization, i.e. at UKÄ level, at administrative level and at institutional level (report 7). In common with other forms of public activity, Swedish universities and colleges have constructed a special organization at local and central levels to deal with information questions.

One of the purposes of this survey was to see whether information and contact activities presented any clear filter effects. In the manifold pattern of internal and external channels of communication in the university system, we found on repeated occasions that questions concerning the effect and function of information were experienced as a problem by many people. At central level mention was made of the difficulty of ascertaining the effect of information efforts. The information secretaries at administrative level felt that there was a distinct lack of interest in the information already available. The study of institutional channels of communication revealed passive information routes which required a great deal of spontaneous activity on the part of the student. A follow-up of UKÄ brochures (report 1) also indicated that the solution of the physical dissemination was not enough. Roughly half the recipients of brochures distributed by post were unable at the time of the follow-up to recall ever having seen a brochure.

Our observations concerning the pattern of information and contact activities led us to conclude that they were distinguished by a special communication strategy, namely the principle of public availability, whereby it is up to the individual to take the initiative and obtain information from the local supplier of information or from some other source. This principle does not only mean that information

must be physically searched for but that it must be searched for mentally as well.

This finding is rather trivial, but at the same time it has a vital bearing on the activities concerned. The communication process does not function unless the individual himself is disposed to search actively for information, to assimilate it and to apply it to his own situation, his own decisions and experience, his own deliberations etc. Different efforts to increase the availability of civic information (e.g. the organisation proposed by the Swedish Committee on Civic Information) will always operate as a principle of public availability if the individual is not disposed to assimilate the information. Consequently unanticipated information is not discovered and used but instead becomes what the communications theorists term noise.

Some experiments in two-way contact

A number of contact experiments were carried out in order to obtain a clearer picture of the prospects and conditions of two-way contact between universities and presumptive adult students. Two of these experiments were principally based on written information while the other two were a combination of written and spoken information. In the first experiment an auto-diagnostic needs questionnaire was tried out and proved capable in certain circumstances of serving a useful purpose in inducing presumptive students to articulate their information and counseling requirements more clearly. Similarly we were able to show that our second experiment, a procedure for requisitioning information on higher education, catered for important information requirements, not least considering that the majority of the people concerned had not previously received the brochures they requisitioned.

The group experiments served to demonstrate that the social context and the real content of the message are crucial to the development potential of the forms of contact. In the third experiment, involving group educational and vocational counseling for adult students (report 2), the participants were very much disposed to seek answers to specific questions, preferably from an expert in the guise of a vocational counsellor. Most of the participants in the experiment had vocational motives for their educational interest. The result of the experimental personnel training day (report 4) clearly testified to the powerful influence of the social role on the physical and environmental conditions attaching to contact and discussion, e.g. the location of the place of employment, the nature of work, the availability of assembly rooms and other communal facilities. At the same time it is important to note that these environmental conditions are only the framework within which the social and psychological facto-s

operate. The results of this experiment do not justify exaggerated hopes of colleagues at work as the spontaneous vehicles of educational information. The distribution of the message, second and third-hand contacts etc. depend to a great extent on a series of factors, many of which are related to the social pattern within which different people act.

Information and counseling needs as an aspect of role change

One of the important points of departure in studying the interaction between the social situation and the ideas of the individual concerning education is of course the question of what the individual himself wishes to do about his situation. On the basis of about 25 interviews of presumptive adult learners at university level, we have tried to analyse the ideas and expectations that are obtained concerning university studies and the extent to which these presumptive students regard education as a means of changing their social situation (reports 5, 7 and 8). Different people can have radically different ideas concerning higher education as an instrument of this kind of change. Some of the interviewees aim at a vertical role change. They regard university education as an aid to the acquisition of another occupation, another social position or of a social role which is different in some other respect. Another function of education is connected with personal growth and development in an existing role. Another example could be termed role confirmation; education is sought as a means of living up to the expectations of others or as a safeguard against "coming down" on the social scale, e.g. vocationally. The motives of some of the interviewees could be described in terms of horizontal role change, i.e. rather than wishing to transform their present situation to any great extent they are intent of deepening and developing their interests and needs in their present roles.

Not unexpectedly, the interviews showed that the tendency for education to be used as an instrument of change or as a stabilizer of the social situation depended on belief in its ability to perform such a function. The interviewees who do not see education leading to any imminent change do not put a great deal of effort into their studies and, therefore, are not in any acute need of information. Other people, regarding education as a direct instrument of change, experience greater direct needs of information. Attitudes to educational information are therefore related in concrete terms to the function attributed to education and the expectations which are entertained concerning it. Mention should be made of the following as being some of the factors in the social situation which influence ideas concerning education and information about education.

Position in the process of educational and vocational decision

People planning to embark on university studies but not for another two, three or four years have completely different information and counseling needs from people intending to start the very next term. A strikingly large number of the people interviewed were in this position, which can be termed a preparatory situation of choice. Simplifying matters somewhat, information and counseling needs can be described as a desire for more or less distinct signposts at different stages or crossroads in the individual person's process of educational and vocational decision, e.g. 1) the initial stage, 2) the recruitment stage and 3) the introductory stage.

Information and counseling needs are dependent on motives for studying

The people who regard education as directly related to their vocational role have different information and counseling requirements from people who put interest in learning as such in the forefront. Ideas concerning one's future vocational role can often be more important that the clarity of a person's ideas concerning the nature of university studies.

Interest in information is affected by social limitations

The interviews also convey a clear picture of the great influence exerted on educational attitudes by the social situation of the presumptive students in terms of social contacts. The social situation of the adult student can often involve geographical, temporal, spatial and interpersonal restrictions. These in turn affect his predisposition towards educational information.

Information and counseling needs are dependent on the decision-making situation

The interviews showed that information and counseling needs could vary a great deal, depending on the way in which the individual formulates his problems of educational choice. Persons who have decided what direction they are going to take have completely different needs from persons who are contemplating various alternatives or who feel generally uncertain. The former group require two-way information of a more technical/administrative nature, while the latter group are more interested in being able to talk their problems over with somebody.

Clarification, preparation and dialogue as counseling criteria

Against this background it is obvious that a great deal of the role transformation undergone by the individual - from employment to higher studies, for example - demands not only information but also abundant opportunities of guidance, discussion and the penetration of problems of educational and vocational choice. This applies both to young students who have recently completed their secondary schooling and to older students who have acquired job experience and social commitments to jobs and families. In the final report from the project (report 8), these problems are discussed with reference to three counseling criteria.

A. Levels of clarification

1) Increase of available information concerning relevant educational and occupational alternatives

2) Exploration by the student of his own premises in making his education and occupational choice

3) The design of decision-making structures in the student's own choice

4) The penetration of premises in the form of psychological commitments to various alternatives

5) The support of initiatives conducive to role change

6) The support of the ego development and self-reliance of the individual and of his search for identity.

B. Levels of preparation

1) Creation of the self-reliance needed for initiatives towards change

2) Simplification of role change by means of role planning, i.e. "negotiation" with the occupiers of complementary roles

3) Improvement of the individual learning strategy, partly by devoting profounder attention to questions of content

4) Supplementation of prior knowledge required for potential educational alternatives.

C. Feedback levels (two-way contacts)

1) Feedback at information level, for example by the more efficient provision of brochures and other information

2) Feedback at interpersonal level, e.g. opportunities of dialogue and discussion

3) Feedback at instructional level, for example via influence on teaching content

4) Feedback at organizational level, for example via influence on the organization of education.

In the final report summarizing the whole of the project, the experience derived from the various field experiments has been analyzed in relation to these criteria.

Where clarification problems are concerned, it is obvious that the one-sided emphasis of information problems is not enough. Information measures cannot be expected to function properly until the individual is aware of his own aptitudes and circumstances and articulates his own information needs. Considering the composite and highly variegated elements of the individual person's educational planning, there are strong reasons for supposing that counseling needs are relatively great, particularly in the case of people planning or faced with decisive role changes. At the same time as the profounder aspects of clarification (e.g. the penetration of premises and psychological commitments) are an important element of the educational and vocational counseling process, they are also more cumbersome in purely methodological terms. The attempts which have been made to ease the clarification process among presumptive students have not always been successful. (Report 8).

The question of the search for identity is particularly important to older students planning decisive changes in their relationship to family and work through the medium of education. In the transition from a care role to a future vocational role, or in self-initiated changes of occupational role, conflicts of role and identity are frequently accentuated. Ostensibly clearly defined motives for changing jobs or raising one's general educational level can be guided by under lying changes in the role repertoire and identity experience of the individual. There were a number of typical subgroups among the interviewees. One such subgroup, of course, is the woman (mother) in a situation of emancipation in relation to traditional family patterns and a delayed professional career. Another example is provided by economically active men who wish by means of education to improve their occupational situation, or those who are struggling to counteract signs of an ongoing process of relegation from their occupational roles.

Problems of preparation occur in various ways. The enhancement of self-reliance probably plays a very important part as an initial element in the preparation

process, not least in the case of students with limited previous experience of studying. The role planning of the individual is another painstaking and time-consuming process. The importance of the social and psychological commitments in educational and occupational choices underlines the importance of the fact that, for counseling purposes, the individual cannot be isolated from his social environment. Experience from the social sector has indicated the need for a "family therapy" approach (the idea being that members of a family cannot be individually influenced, so that work has to be done with the family as a whole) to be adopted in counseling when elucidating the relationship of the presumptive student to his family or to his work.

The great heterogeneity of the student population of today and tomorrow underlines the need for a dialogue or two-way contacts between higher education and presumptive students. Contacts of this kind should be aimed primarily at clarifying possible alternative courses of action by means of greater information and opportunities of discussion and analysis. It is also important for the search for knowledge and the creation of knowledge to be regarded as a constant process in which the presumptive student can also play an active part in the shaping of his learning situations. The problem and project orientation which is being tested today in many contexts within higher studies could be one way of stimulating this type of influence.

Continued research needed

The project has been mainly formulative in character. Consequently it has been more concerned with problem seeking and problem definition than with the empirical testing of particular ideas or hypotheses concerning the nature of information and counseling problems. Further investigations are therefore urgently needed in this sector. One problem for investigation concerns efforts to define criteria for information and counseling measures. Hitherto evaluations of study information have placed overmuch emphasis on relatively superficial criteria, e.g. whether the recipient has seen or assimilated the information material concerned. Less attention has been paid to the social and psychological contexts in which information is received and is expected to be used. The concepts of clarification, preparation and feedback are designed to rectify the one-sided focus of these criteria on the technics of information.

Another important area is concerned with the role change often implied by higher studies, seen in the light of social psychology and developmental psychology. Development is often initiated in crises or decisive changes in a person's social and occupational circumstances. But we still do not know enough about the individual process of change. What is needed by different groups in order to accomplish role changes by means of adult education? What are the individual and social prices of such changes, especially as regards persons of mature age and in relatively established social

situations? Clearly, questions of adjustment and identity seeking play a very important part here, but we are still very limited in our knowledge of the interaction between identity seeking and self-image on the one hand and learning problems and motivation on the other.

The project has also shown the difficulty of pinning down the role which information and counseling can play in facilitating identity seeking and the learning situation. It has also been hard to establish any compensatory effects of information and counseling efforts in the case of group which are underprivileged where higher studies are concerned. Therefore this sector too is in need, not only of further research but also, to no less an extent, of various practical experiments involving information and counseling efforts focussing on specific target groups of varying width. As long as it remains difficult for the education system as such to document successful compensatory measures on behalf of educationally underprivileged groups, one cannot realistically expect such effects to stem from isolated experiments in information and counseling.

Practical experience

To start with the project also functioned as a consultancy project in connection with the current information activities of the UKÄ Information Section and local information secretariats. In the course of the project, evaluations were undertaken of study information campaigns and efforts were made at various conferences to discuss the further development of information activities. Although no systematic evaluation has been made of these activities, there can be no doubt that the co-operation was favourably viewed by the information officers and counselors concerned. Apart from such spin-off effects, the project has generated a number of viewpoints concerning the practical side of information.

Firstly, it is clear that the way in which information material for presumptive students is designed does a great deal to influence the practical use to which that information is put. Efforts to develop auto-diagnostic questionnaires revealed that information can be made more effective if there is a quide or guidance which not only directs the search for information but also raises questions having an important bearing on educational and vocational choice. On the other hand it seems difficult to evolve a generally applicable body of material for educational and vocational counseling. The material has to be adapted to learning conditions, aptitudes for different types of education and the type of subject content.

Another practical viewpoint concerns the need to inte-

grate centrally initiated information and counseling measures with the information, counseling and introduction provided at various universities, colleges and institutions. The main task of centrally organized information and counseling must be to make it easier for presumptive students of various ages to ask more adequate questions concerning the possible long-term and short-term implications of higher studies. This will give them more opportunity of realistically comparing different alternatives and of ascertaining the preparations required for their studies. In this way centrally initiated information activities can be seen as an information link between the situation of the presumptive student and the reality communicated by teachers, counselors and students at institutional level.

One problem in this connection, however, is that central informers sometimes tend to underestimate or to avoid broaching the problems and realities which higher studies really involve. More often than not, centrally initiated information focusses on the outward framework of studies and the special admission requirements applying to different courses and subjects. In connection with the reform of higher education, it is also obvious that, due among other things to various campaigns in the mass media, centrally initiated information has been preoccupied with drawing attention to higher education opportunities, far less interest having been devoted to guiding presumptive students into a pattern of thinking which will help them to arrive at a clearer appreciation and understanding of the true implications of higher studies.

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REPORTS

Upwards of twenty reports of varying scope and content have been produced in the course of the project. Most of them have been published by the Department of Education in the University of Stockholm, but two of them (nos. 3 and 7) have been published by Studentlitteratur. The following are the most important.

1. Ohlsson, L B — Information om högre utbildning - en studie av spridningsmönstret för tre UKÄ-broschyrer. 1972 (Information about higher education - a study of the distribution pattern of three UKÄ brochures. 1972.) (In Swedish)

2. Abrahamsson, K — Försök med studie- och yrkesorientering i grupp för vuxenstuderande. 1973. (Experiments in group educational and vocational counseling for adult students. 1973.) (In Swedish)

3. Abrahamsson, K — Kom igen Svensson! Om vuxenutbildningens kommunikationsproblem. Studentlitteratur AB, Lund. 1974. (Try once again Mr. Svensson! Communication problems in adult education. Studentlitteratur AB, Lund. 1974.) (In Swedish)

4. Abrahamsson, K — Personalutbildningsdagen - ett försök med diskussionsgrupper om arbetskrav och utbildningsbehov samt utbildningsinformation för fyra yrkesgrupper. 1975. (Personnel Training Day. Group discussions of job requirements and training needs and educational information for four groups. An experiment. 1975.) (In Swedish)

5. Abrahamsson, K — Informations- och vägledningsbehov hos presumtiva vuxenstuderande på universitetsnivå. 1974. (The information and counseling needs of presumptive adult students at university level. 1974.) (In Swedish)

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8. Abrahamsson, K — The Need for a Dialogue. On the Counseling Needs of Presumptive Adult Learners in Higher Education. Doct. diss. Second rev. ed. 232 pp. 1976.

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